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Scale How, Ambleside, UK, 2009

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Canada

"WHY LEARN GREEK AND LATIN?"

BY R. L. LEIGHTON,

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IT seems not superfluous to draw attention to some reasons for maintaining the study of the ancient classical languages at a time when even in Cambridge efforts have been made to reduce Greek at least, to the position of an optional subject. Though these efforts have failed—for the time—we may be certain that they will be renewed; and meantime, outside opinion, long satisfied that Greek is quite useless except for theologians, is glad to hear that there is some movement among the dry bones of the old Universities, and is more than ever convinced of its own infallibility. It may be noted, indeed, in passing, that public opinion is wrong in supposing itself to be supported by University opinion: which, far from attempting to disparage the intrinsic and educational value of Greek, argues only that for certain men it is necessary to forgo the unquestioned benefits of the study, because these men aim at becoming specialists in some other branch of knowledge; and if their object is to be achieved, the price will have to be paid, Greek being one—and only one—of the many desirable things which must be deliberately sacrificed to the accomplishment of the main purpose. But others demand the abandonment of Greek (with Latin to follow very shortly) on the grounds that (1) the study of language is of less value than physical science; and (2) a living language offers every advantage that can be derived from the study of Greek, in addition to its utility as increasing our means of communication.

Now language is not a human work, as is a house, or a ship, but has been evolved in man without his exercising more control over the process than over the evolution of his own digestive system; therefore the study of language is as truly a branch of physical science as any other: indeed it may be fairly maintained that it is no less an experimental

"WHY LEARN GREEK"

science than chemistry. For we analyse an unknown substance, our tongue, or any other, living materials and his power over them which to him at least is new; and in either case will be exactly

accurate observation and intelligence.

It follows that there can be a study of language and the subjects which assume such opposition, they to be mended by adducing there is a learning of language advocated at present, which is scientific study; or the further

that there are instances of language by methods which, without a "natural" method, are quite little or no educational value.

does not differ from any other branch, for instance, which is probably

knowledge we possess: yet the very painstaking, students of

rule. Further, a great deal of teaching is of exactly the same cause lying not in the subject

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that the mere semblance of the real knowledge. If they are

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these opinions are as deadly as to Latin and Greek, and

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Thirst for knowledge has sustained effort except in the

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science than chemistry. For whether a boy is attempting to analyse an unknown substance, or to write an exercise in his own tongue, or any other, living or dead, he is testing his materials and his power over them by a practical experiment, which to him at least is new; and the measure of his success in either case will be exactly proportional to his powers of accurate observation and intelligent inference.

It follows that there can be no opposition between the study of language and the study of nature, and arguments which assume such opposition must be unsound. Nor are they to be mended by adducing the undeniable fact that there is a learning of language, and one that is vigorously advocated at present, which is as far as possible from being scientific study; or the further and equally undeniable fact that there are instances of language being taught and studied by methods which, without offering the advantages of the “natural” method, are quite unscientific, and therefore of little or no educational value. But in this respect language does not differ from any other branch of knowledge—geometry, for instance, which is probably the most perfectly scientific knowledge we possess: yet there are professing, and certainly very painstaking, students of geometry who learn Euclid by rote. Further, a great deal of so-called natural science teaching is of exactly the same worthless description; the cause lying not in the subject at all, but in the unfortunate fact that so many of the learners have no desire to acquire a knowledge of the subject, though they may desire to obtain the rewards of its acquisition, such as the passing of an examination, or the like. In that case they readily believe that the mere semblance of the knowledge, without the reality, is all they need, and may be obtained more cheaply than real knowledge. If they are still children at school they will mostly find their parents holding the same opinions; but these opinions are as deadly foes to chemistry and physics as to Latin and Greek, and are to be encountered only by insisting on the idea of duty, and the paramount obligation of working honestly at the particular task of the moment.

Thirst for knowledge has not force enough to produce sustained effort except in the few cases where the idea of duty happens to take that special and unusual form. Again, as the idea of duty resides in the worker, not in the work, of

which indeed it seems to be quite independent, so interest in any study resides in the student, not in the subject. The student may be compelled by a necessity which he recognises, or stimulated by competition: the latter is a poor broken reed, and the former he will rightly try to escape, unless he has somehow come to regard his study as duty—the “something which has to be done, whether it pleases anybody or nobody”—otherwise he will detest and resist atoms and molecules as strenuously as accidence and syntax, or any other subject that can be laid before him.

For all serious systematic study is of necessity dry, and involves much drudgery; although pleasures will incidentally accompany the study, we cannot foresee when or how or in what shape they will come; while to pursue or count upon them is to court disappointment. Moreover, the material rewards of knowledge are remote—far too remote to act as an incentive to its acquisition with any considerable proportion of persons, young or old. Nor are they only remote, they are also meagre, and by no means sure, seeing that many other conditions, beyond the bare possession of knowledge, must be fulfilled before these rewards can be gained. We can show a few men who have made a striking success of chemistry, for example: but must not ignore others who have used their knowledge in such a way as to come to the gallows; for the average student of chemistry the one fate is as improbable, and therefore irrelevant, as the other. And although we can truly say that knowledge of any kind often brings material advantages in various unexpected ways, and the Scotch and Germans, who are willing to acquire knowledge on the mere chance of utilising it, do thereby frequently succeed better than others; yet we cannot *promise* such rewards. It follows that we must look elsewhere to find grounds for preferring one study to another, or, indeed, for requiring the young to study anything beyond those elements which have become necessities of life for civilized mankind. The only safe ground is educational value: the worth of study as the means of suppling and strengthening the intellect, over and above that moral value which belongs to all forms of work.

Yet there is one art, one branch of knowledge beyond the elementary stage, in which every human being has a very real concern; and that art is language. Everyone uses it,

and must use it; but civilized consciousness of its own blundering, that when it is a matter of importance, a speech is saying something quite different from the bulk of the work of lawyers and judges, language not admitting of misexpression, commonly the result of insufficient drafting of documents of Parliament downwards. Consequently be regarded as obviously misunderstood by numbers, even though they are quite well understand. Printed instances whatever afford glaring instances are faulty in expression: often where they are not in fault at all, instrument of thought; and language in our language is a sure instrument of thinking; while of language means an increase in our power of clear expression, increasing our skill in the use to clear up some of this much best means is the study of something very different from it, enormously lightens the Many waiters can take an half-a-dozen languages, but all that: they can be as puzzled as their native German. For not become an art, admitting remains a sort of half-voluntary breaking, hardly at all under form of expression that preserves the last. They may dimly wanted to say; but there is power over language: they to make them convey the intention comes only from the serious

and must use it; but civilized mankind has become so conscious of its own blundering unskilfulness in the employment of language, that when it is necessary to put into words any matter of importance, a specialist is called in to save us from saying something quite different from what we intend. The bulk of the work of lawyers consists in the effort to find language not admitting of mistake or dispute, in which to express very simple matters of fact; and litigation is commonly the result of insufficient precision on their part in drafting of documents of various kinds, from Acts of Parliament downwards. Conversely, language which cannot reasonably be regarded as obscure or ambiguous is nevertheless misunderstood by numbers of those who read or hear it, even though they are quite honestly trying not to misunderstand. Printed instructions for doing anything whatever afford glaring instances in both kinds. Often they are faulty in expression: oftener still they are misunderstood where they are not in fault at all. But again language is the instrument of thought; and lack of clearness and precision in our language is a sure indication of a corresponding muddle in our thinking; while an increase in our command of language means an increase in power of thought. Now to increase our power of clear and accurate thinking by increasing our skill in the use of the instrument of thinking—to clear up some of this muddle in our minds—by far the best means is the study of language; which, however, is something very different from picking up languages, though it enormously lightens the labour of this latter pursuit. Many waiters can take an order, or present a bill, in half-a-dozen languages, but know nothing of language for all that: they can be as puzzle-headed in French or English as their native German. For them the use of language has not become an art, admitting of unlimited improvement, but remains a sort of half-voluntary action, like swallowing or breathing, hardly at all under their own control. The first form of expression that presents itself to their minds is also the last. They may dimly feel that it is not what they wanted to say; but there is no skill at their command, no power over language: they cannot remodel their sentences to make them convey the intended meaning. This power comes only from the serious study of language in some form

or other, and most readily from the study of some foreign language. The language chosen should differ widely from the mother-tongue of the student, because sharp contrasts, as of black ink on white paper, more readily fix the attention and stick in the memory. It should also be at least equal to the mother-tongue as an instrument of thought, and it should be capable of stimulating the mind of the learner by introducing him to new ideas and unfamiliar ways of looking at the world around him. Finally, as it is not to be an end in itself, but a means of awakening the intellect to a consciousness of the delicate differences and shades of meaning conveyed by slight variations of expression, it should be a language which will not be required to be employed with the glibness of every-day intercourse. The habit of weighing every word of it is an obstacle to glibness in its use; so it comes about that fine classical scholars do not speak Greek or Latin after a lifetime of study; and great conveyancers, with their similar habit of minutely examining each word used, do not often make good speakers. This last consideration is alone a great objection to the adoption of a modern language for this elaborate study; but in the other points also the ancient classical languages offer greater advantages as educational instruments. French is not sufficiently unlike English, except to the really advanced student. German, with its inflections, is different enough, but cumbersome, and when it influences an English style spoils it. Then the stock of ideas current in Paris Berlin and London is virtually identical—at any rate as compared with the great differences between all civilized modern thought and the thought of men not inferior to us in civilization, but differing widely in religion, and in their political, social and economic conditions. Nothing so quickly or strongly stimulates us to perceive and understand the conditions under which we live as the contemplation of other men living under conditions that strikingly contrast with our own. Personal experience of these differences is unattainable, for few can afford foreign travel, and those who can travel rarely get far below the surface of hotels and shops, which are much the same all over the civilized world. Consequently we are thrown back on books, which indeed cannot produce the same vivid impressions as personal observation, but more than compensate for this defect by enabling us to gain some

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knowledge of ages long past, and of countries that we shall never see. I do not urge the merits of style and matter of the classical writers: the matter at any rate can be got at in translations, and with that some people would have us be content. But a boy learning a modern language will not and cannot be set to read books requiring anything like the same kind and amount of thought as the classics. The traditional first Latin author is Caesar's own memoir of the history that he himself made. Contrast with it the trivial stuff offered to beginners in any modern language: the latter may be more “appropriate”; but which will sooner brace the mind? Later on, but still during boyhood, the more advanced pupil will read Demosthenes and Cicero, which will involve considerable study of history and law. How many men ever spend an hour on the law or history of Germany or France as a means to understanding a French or German writer? The book which invites such study will be left unread in favour of less exacting literature.

Lastly, this constant practice in the difficult task of understanding the feelings, purposes, beliefs and actions of those men, so remote from us in time, and almost every external condition, yet so near to us in all essentials;—is it not an admirable method of awakening and widening our sympathies and enlarging our power of understanding our own immediate neighbours? And does not that process, so far as it is carried, tend to make us better neighbours, and therefore better and happier men? I am not pretending that the study of Greek and Latin will turn a vicious ruffian into a true gentleman: subjects and methods of study constitute only one factor, and that one not the most important, out of many which must combine to produce such a result; but I do maintain that the old course of classical study does tend in that direction far more strongly than any other; and that real civilization is not so far advanced, or so widely spread, or so securely established, that we can afford to let slip anything that tends to its progress diffusion and preservation.